

► Art History Supplement  
vol. 2, no. 6, November 2012

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# Ideology and the Urban Experience in Alex Proyas' *Dark City*

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## Abstract

This paper, after briefly summarising the plot of Alex Proyas' *Dark City* and exploring its similarities with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), will also attempt to draw parallels between Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* and *Dark City* and portray how urban life is represented through the eyes of the director. Following this, the paper will illustrate how Proyas perceives life in the city as one under an oppressive regime of Ideology, which can only be overturned through the realisation of its existence. Playing with the cliché of 'heart against the mind' and 'individual will against the collective manipulation', Proyas composes a recognisable film of man's victory over the oppressive Other in an unrecognisable setting. The film is an allegory of urban life that revolves around the importance of space and memory as defining variables of identity and the significance of their manipulation by the system in power.

Imagine a city where the sun does not rise. Its architecture is a mixture of indistinguishable eras and shifts every midnight along with the memories of the citizens, as a result of an experiment conducted by an alien race –the Strangers- that are searching for what makes people human. Imagine a city where everything is artificial including identities and you have *Dark City* (1998): An allegory of urban life that revolves around the importance of space and memory as defining variables of identity and the significance of their manipulation by the system in power. For someone who has watched Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), it is evident that Proyas is paying homage to this historic moment of cinema; this essay, after briefly summarising the plot of *Dark City* and exploring the similarities between the two films, will also attempt to draw parallels between Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* and

*Dark City* and portray how urban life is represented through the eyes of the director. Following this, the essay will illustrate how Proyas perceives life in the city as one under an oppressive regime of Ideology, which can only be overturned through the realisation of its existence. Playing with the cliché of ‘heart against the mind’ and ‘individual will against the collective manipulation’, Proyas composes a recognisable film of man’s victory over the oppressive Other in an unrecognisable setting.

More specifically, this neo-noir film takes place in a city which is floating in outer space as is revealed to us towards the end. Its architecture consists of a mixture of eras and styles including the America of the 40s, 50s and 60s. John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) wakes up in a bath tub without remembering his name due to a mistake the Strangers made that did not allow for his ‘imprinting’ to complete. The only thing he has is a post-card of a sunny place called “Shell Beach” and he is off to discover who he is. The Strangers are an alien race who inhabits the dead bodies of humans, and they run the city. They ‘imprint’ people with fabricated memories, and in combination with the psychokinetic process that is called ‘tuning’, which is powered by a machine underground, they alter the appearance of the city every midnight. They do so in order to find out what it is that makes people ‘human’ because they need to become human as well and survive their gradual and imminent demise. Murdoch has been partially imprinted with the memories of a serial killer and therefore from the plot of the first half of the film, the spectators are under the impression that it is a regular film about murder. Even a detective (Det. Bumstead played by William Hurt) features, but soon enough, the plot shifts away from the familiar detective film motif when Murdoch discovers that he can ‘tune’ himself, he meets with Dr. Schreber (Kiefer Sutherland) who works for the Strangers, and he finds out that there is something wrong with the city along with the memories of its citizens which have ‘Shell Beach’ as a common point of reference. With help from his devised wife, the detective and the doctor, Murdoch manages to destroy the Strangers and re-build the city according to his most recent fabricated memories that revolve around Shell Beach.

The film begins with a panoramic view of the city just like in *Metropolis*, of compelling buildings that belong to a devised world whose secret mechanism will be discovered and destroyed by the desire of the ones being oppressed to free themselves by means of their hearts. The machines in both films are portrayed as threatening and over-ruling and illustrate ‘the downfall of the Western world [...] [which] was a result of the supremacy of the

machine and the technological spirit'.<sup>1</sup> They are operated by groups of entities which function collectively and are also endowed with human characteristics (Figure set 1). The underground city in *Dark City* is also similar to the one in *Metropolis* but the social stratification - although vertical in both - is reversed: In *Metropolis* the ones who rule are above ground while in *Dark City* they are underground, and they are the ones who work on an assembly line. Furthermore, the scientists in the films (Dr. Schreber and C.A. Rotwang) both are portrayed as 'unbalanced', eventually turning against their oppressors and finally, like in most apocalyptic films, the catastrophe is 'followed by a brief glimpse of a new beginning, one that holds the promise of an alternative to dystopia'.<sup>2</sup> But this is as far as the similarities of the two films go. Unlike *Metropolis*, *Dark City* is not rescued by a social group which had been well-aware of the oppression it endured and therefore united in order to subvert it. Instead, the citizens in *Dark City* are unable to form a community because of the bonds that get broken every night, and they are not even conscious of the Strangers' dominance or existence except for one individual who will wake up, seize the means of production and carry the 'light' of truth and liberation like a post-human Prometheus.

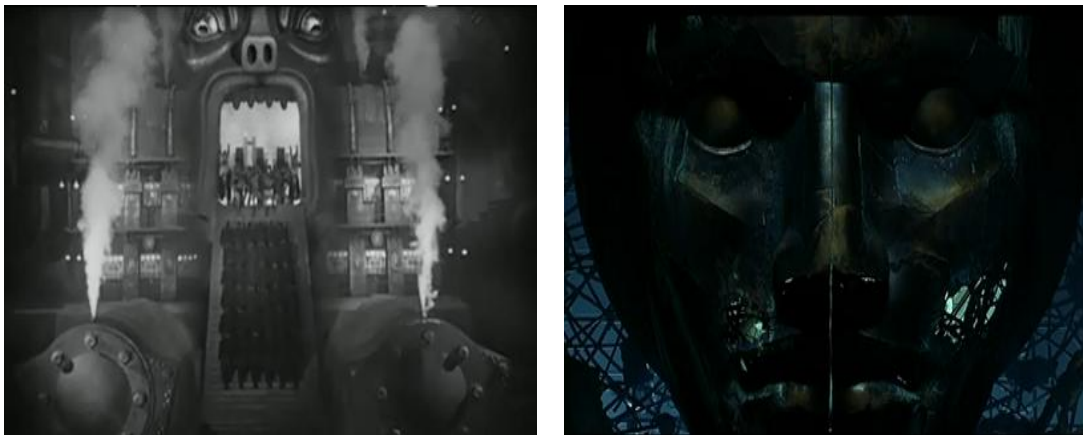


Fig. Set 1. Anthropomorphic Machines. Left: Moloch from *Metropolis*  
Right: Head-clock from *Dark City*.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaes, Anton. "The Phantasm of the Apocalypse: Metropolis and Weimar Modernity." *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*. By Gyan Prakash. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. 17-30. Print. pg. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg. 17.

However, the focus of both films is still the urban experience and this is the point at which *Dark City* and Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* converge. One of the most interesting points Simmel makes, is the blasé attitude of the metropolitan man:

That is why cities are also the genuine locale of the blasé attitude. In the blasé attitude the concentration of men and things stimulate the nervous system of the individual to its highest achievement so that it attains its peak. Through the mere quantitative intensification of the same conditioning factors this achievement is transformed into its opposite and appears in the peculiar adjustment of the blasé attitude. In this phenomenon the nerves find in the refusal to react to their stimulation [*sic*] the last possibility of accommodating to the contents and forms of metropolitan life.<sup>3</sup>

This blasé attitude is what preoccupies Simmel, since it leads to a reserve that causes people to not know their neighbours but develop 'a mutual strangeness and repulsion' instead.<sup>4</sup> Especially Detective Bumstead epitomises this blasé attitude: He is so numb that he does not react to the murders, he does not seem particularly interested in solving the crime, and he is attached to an accordion supposedly given to him by his mother, only he cannot remember when or how, illustrating how 'the city is home to an amnesia born of sensory overstimulation and fatigue'.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the citizens of *Dark City* have not even got a character, they do not interact, and they are not interested in any human relation; they do not even participate in the plot of the film. They are the embodiment of the alienated, blasé metropolitans which are echoed in Ezra Pound's imagist poem:

*In a Station of the Metro*  
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.<sup>6</sup>

It is wonderful how Pound captures the quality of the 'apparition'; the faceless citizen who becomes a meaningless phantom among the crowd and moves around the city almost without a body as well, since their entity has no significance or gravity and plays no role, resembling a ghost. Along with the 'black' background which aptly interweaves with the lightless *Dark City*, we become the spectators of an unintentional intertextuality. Others

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<sup>3</sup> Simmel, Georg. *Metropolis and Mental Life*. Chicago: Syllabus Division, University of Chicago, 1961. Print. pg. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Gilloch, Graeme. *Walter Benjamin--Critical Constellations*. Malden, MA: Polity in Association with Blackwell, 2001. Print. pg. 216.

<sup>6</sup> Published in the magazine *Poetry* in 1913, in Chicago, Illinois.



when watching *Dark City* are reminded of Edward Hopper's paintings, probably because they convey the emptiness, the darkness and his obsession with 'night', the haziness and the emotional distance in the (American) big city.<sup>78</sup>

Simmel is also interested in the atrophy of the individual and the hypertrophy of the built environment of the large-scale urban society (*Gesellschaft*<sup>9</sup>) which are interrelated as the individual subjects react to their artificial environment. As Gerlach and Hamilton put it:

His description of life in the city evokes a futuristic imaginary: dark strangers moving anonymously through a perpetually changing urban landscape populated by other strangers, often flamboyantly performing as a means of constructing individuality within the impersonal megastructures of the modern metropolis, interacting strictly through the cash nexus, set adrift from traditional forms of solidarity and lacking any contemporary forms of belonging, wearing masks of indifference as protections against the hyper-stimulation of the built environment.<sup>10</sup>

Their perception of Simmel's work, successfully fits *Dark City* with its Strangers and the 'perpetually changing urban landscape' through their act of tuning which reshapes the architecture of the city and constructs new memories and personal belongings such as photo albums from scratch. An artificial reconstruction of the urban space and memory with help from machines which results in an environment that people are never familiar with. When Murdoch asks the people around him where Shell Beach is and how one can get there, no one can answer him. It is impossible for them to get accustomed to this incessant change and instead of adapting, they atrophy in the face of the built environment and merely 'exist' within the city like Pound's apparitions.

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<sup>7</sup> Hopper, Edward. *Nighthawks*. 1942. Oil on canvas 84.1 cm × 152.4 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. <http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~molouns/amst450/village/art5.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Hopper, Edward. *Night Windows*. 1928. Oil on canvas 73.7 x 86.4 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York City, New York. [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=79270](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79270).

<sup>9</sup> *Gesellschaft*: a rationally developed mechanistic type of social relationship characterized by impersonally contracted associations between persons (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gesellschaft>). It also loosely translates into 'Up to down administration surveillance'.

<sup>10</sup> Gerlach, Neil, and Sheryl N. Hamilton. "Preserving Self in the City of the Imagination: Georg Simmel and *Dark City*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34.2 (2004): 115-34. JSTOR. Web. 12 Nov. 2011. pg. 118.

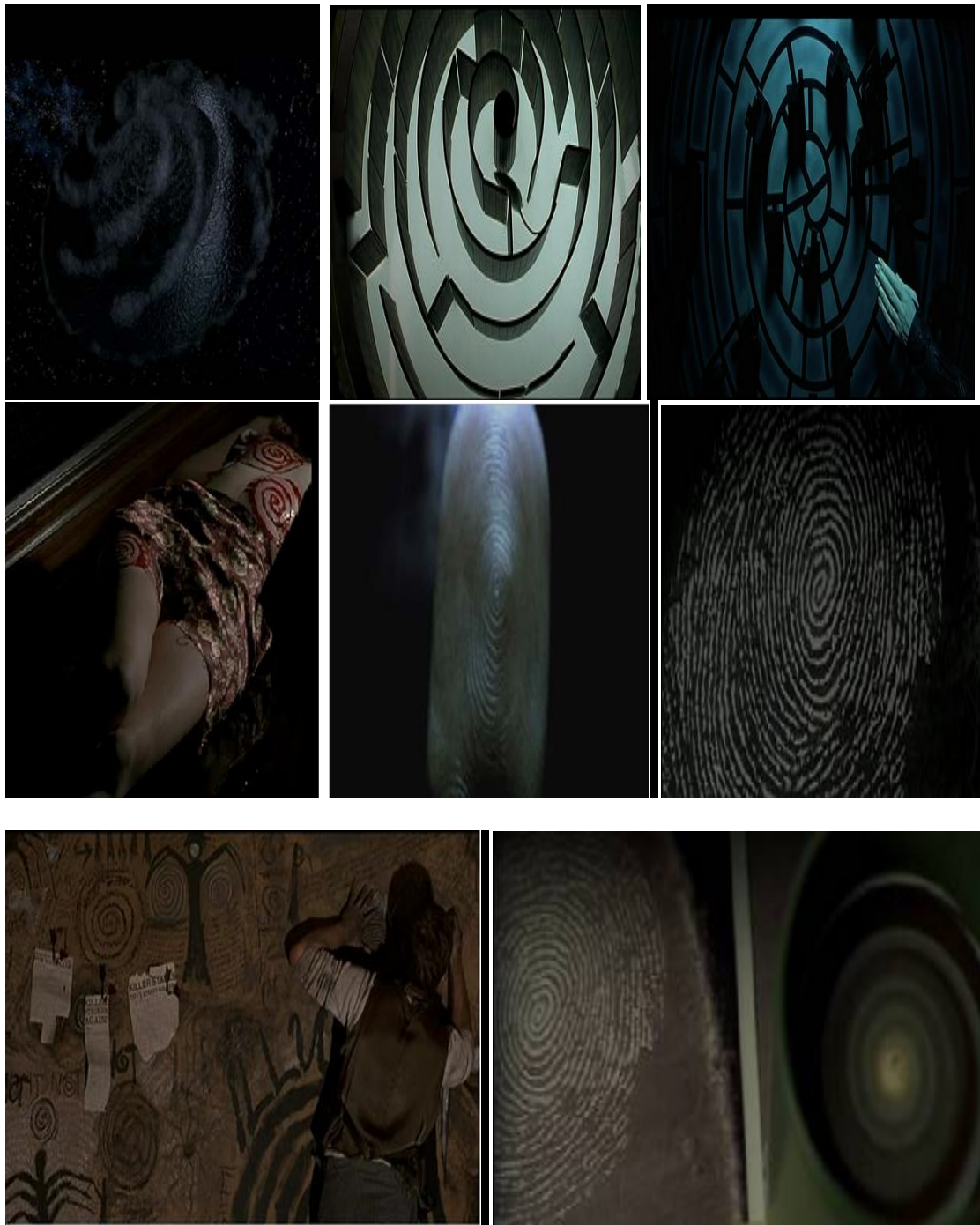


Fig. Set 2. Examples of the spiral as a recurrent image in *Dark City*.

Another depiction of the atrophy of the individual is the symbol of the spiral which appears and re-appears throughout the film (Figure set 2). We first see it as a carved wound on the murdered victims, the Strangers have a model of the city which is shaped like a spiral, Murdoch's fingerprint is a spiral, Dr. Schreber's maze in which he experiments with mice is also shaped like one and another detective (Colin Friels) in the film that goes insane because

he discovers the truth, keeps drawing them. Proyas in the commentary of the film says that it is 'an endless loop which spirals inwards [...]'. The inertia of going round and round in circles with potentially no way out' of the urban environment; the existential nightmare of not being able to get back where you came from. Of course it ties successfully with Benjamin's figure of the labyrinth which 'captures not only the perplexing, disorienting urban environment, but also the convolutions and complexities of memory'<sup>11</sup> as is precisely the case of *Dark City*. 'Lewis Mumford is also highly critical of the large urban space, suggesting it spirals downward in stages of social destruction from metropolis to megalopolis, culminating in a necropolis'.<sup>12</sup> Lewis' wording is very interesting in using the word 'spiral' which is a recurrent symbol in the film and what is more, one could argue that the surface of *Dark City* begins with a metropolis above and spirals down to a necropolis, as human corpses are the Stranger's hosts. Even if the imagery remains above ground on the actual city, the 'necropolis' is still a valid characterisation since the ghostly quality of the citizens is already discussed and *Dark City* is made of fragments and pieces of different cities, movements and eras stitched together, constituting a Frankenstein-city. A living dead space, a monster-city - like the Strangers are undead and monstrous - which is an awry mosaic reflected on the cuts of the film that occur almost every two seconds.

This downfall of the spiral can only be overcome through the hypertrophy of the individual according to Simmel, which is actualised in the film in two distinct ways: The awakening of the protagonist who has become post-human through his mutation that gave him the ability to tune, and his victorious relationship with the fabricated wife. Both ways are reflected in Simmel's work who, regarding the hypertrophy of the individual, pinpointed the deepest problems of modern life in 'the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence [*sic*] in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life' and their resistance to be ruined by a 'social technological mechanism'.<sup>13</sup> That is why

man is tempted to adopt the most tendentious peculiarities, that is, the specifically metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice, and preciousness. Now, the meaning of these extravagances does not at all lie in the contents of such behavior, but rather in its form of 'being different'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gilloch, pg. 222.

<sup>12</sup> Gerlach and Hamilton pg. 118.

<sup>13</sup> Simmel, pg. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid pg. 57.

It is this preservation of the self that is represented in Murdoch's resistance to 'imprinting', his ability to tune, his determination to find out who he really is and go after the memories that have shaped him. He employs 'the utmost in uniqueness and particularisation, in order to preserve his most personal core. He 'has to exaggerate this personal element in order to remain audible even to himself'.<sup>15</sup> Murdoch refuses to 'become a mere cog in an enormous organisation of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life'.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, 'all intimate emotional relations between persons are founded in their individuality, whereas in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in itself indifferent'.<sup>17</sup> Apparently, besides his preoccupation with how individuals interact with their built environment, Simmel is also interested in the relationships among subjects and how they add to the hypertrophy of the individual which in turn triumphs over the artificiality of their surroundings. It is therefore John's relationship with his wife Emma that plays a significant role in the unfolding of the plot, since regardless of its fabrication, it reveals the point that Proyas attempts to make: It is the heart that wins in the end. It is in two scenes that Proyas' cliché is depicted. One is the scene in the prison where Murdoch tells her the truth about how they are not actually husband and wife and that they have probably never met before, followed by this dialogue:

*Emma:* I love you, John. You can't fake something like that.

*John:* No, you can't.

The other scene is when Murdoch faces Mr. Hand (Richard O'Brien) who has volunteered to be imprinted with Murdoch's recently manufactured memories and their dialogue is the following:

*Mr. Hand:* But I wanted to know what it was like. How you feel.

*John:* You know how I was supposed to feel. That person isn't me. Never was. You wanted to know what it was that makes us human. Well, you're not going to find it... [*Murdoch points at his head*] ...in here. You went looking in the wrong place.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid pg. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid pg. 58.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid pg. 49.

Consequently, this is where the Strangers fail and where Simmel is justified in locating an individual's spirituality and value.

As far as the life in the big city is concerned, Proyas remains quite loyal to the devices of film noir. He treats the setting with respect and significance, the characters' function is distinct - as is the stratification - and he gives a good account of how he views modern urban life. Especially the city is handled with attention and loyalty to how a dystopia is represented. Dimenberg has said that 'Hollywood functioned as the architect of nostalgia'<sup>18</sup> and in *Dark City* this sense emanates in such abundance that it becomes uncomfortable. With the use of artefacts from several different eras such as the buildings, or Emma's dresses from the 40s while she sings songs from the 60s, vintage cars and the automat, Proyas achieves to convey the metropolis as 'placeless, bereft of historical markers, and increasingly indistinguishable from other cities'<sup>19</sup>, along with establishing its role in the film as part of the experiment: Different objects mean different reactions to them. The automat in particular is a nice touch, since it was a part of older American urban life in big cities, but as it does not exist anymore, it acquires a futuristic quality. Movable architectural elements in general become characters in the drama and upstage the activities of the human characters. When at some point John opens a door and there is nothing behind it so he just hangs there from his fingers, we suppose that he will fall, but since the buildings are moving, one of them rises and saves him.

Clearly, this is one of the instances where Dimenberg's argument is realised when he claims that the city is 'alternately agent and medium, subject and object [...] an indispensable catalyst of narrative development, for which reason it is often regarded almost as if it were a character participating in the action'.<sup>20</sup> The spaces that resemble rat-mazes, the interiors of rooms that are small and their manipulated angles, psychologically affect the audience as if the city were an actual character. As far as the characters played by actors are concerned, they are quite archetypal in the sense that their role within the city is distinct both on professional level and on plot level. In the same way that a director plays with the configurations of each character, so do the Strangers who experiment with them as if they have trapped them in a scenario. This is probably the reason why we often sense that the characters do not feel comfortable in their own bodies. Especially Detective Bumstead is constantly portrayed as

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<sup>18</sup> Dimenberg, Edward. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004. Print. pg. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid pg. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid pg. 25.

numb and confused. The rest of the characters also have a robotic quality which adds to their treatment as lab mice, including Dr. Schreber who is the ambivalent one, teaming with the ones who rule. Murdoch is of course the hero of the story and it is interesting how Proyas chose for the leading role an actor who was not famous, possibly because he wanted to create a feeling of universality in the sense that it could have been anyone going through Murdoch's ordeal. He is 'the Hessianian *flâneur*\*\* [who] loses himself not only in the spatial maze of the city, but also, as a native of the metropolis, in the temporal labyrinth of his own memories'.<sup>21</sup> The Strangers are the proverbial villains; the embodiment of any threat against humanity. Their approach is a military one as evident from their costumes and group behaviour, representing the enemy of individual will. If Murdoch's weapon against them is the power of humanity, soul and individual will, then their power is the one to control destiny; they represent what people would be like if they lost their soul. When it comes to the social stratification between the villains and the victims, regardless of the fact that the Strangers rule - which semantically links to 'above' rather than 'below' - they inhabit the underground. Like nocturnal creatures of the sewers that lurk and remain hidden like any form of power that wishes to remain a power. Their movement around the city is also different from the one of the citizens, since the Strangers flow around instead of walking.



\*\* *Flâneur*: an idle man-about-town (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/flaneur>). A term enriched by Baudelaire to denote someone who experiences the city like 'a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness' (9). Baudelaire, Charles, and Jonathan Mayne. *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*. [London]: Phaidon, 1964. Print.

<sup>21</sup> Gilloch, pg. 199.





Fig. Set 3. Examples of emptiness in *Dark City*.

Through what kind of city and conditions do the ‘victims’ navigate blasé and confused, then? *Dark City* seems to have plenty of empty spaces (Figure set 3) where the spectator expects people but there are none, illustrating the artificial distance among the inhabitants and symbolising their emotional distance, drowned in the anonymity of urban life. Fredrik Jameson interestingly uses the word ‘imprinted’ to describe how postmodern media culture has influenced human subjectivity and existential experience so much, that according to Andrew Milner, ‘identity itself is increasingly understood as constructed and hence indeterminate; that referentiality becomes so attenuated that the ‘signifier becomes its own referent’, the ‘sign no longer designates anything at all’.<sup>22</sup> Many signs in *Dark City* do not lead to a signified, such as photographs and personal items, but the best example for that is ‘Shell Beach’. It only exists on post-cards and advertisements but there is no signified beyond the signifier. Although its appearance should designate an indexical sign with correspondence to something tangible and solid, it is an empty sign. It symbolises the sunny break from your dark urban existence but is represented in the film as unattainable. It is a noir convention

<sup>22</sup> Milner, Andrew. "Darker Cities: Urban Dystopia and Science Fiction Cinema." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7.3 (2004): 259-79. SAGE. Web. 15 Nov. 2011. pg. 26.

that demands an object of 'retrogressive desire (nostalgia) or progressive desire (utopia), always defined by its absence, deferral, or unattainability' according to Hantke. The way he describes it, 'it is associated with proximity to origins, beginnings, and hence authenticity, in sharp contrast to the industrial city, the "archetype of the artificial environment"'.<sup>23</sup> Which is exactly the case of *Dark City* in which Murdoch haunted by his nostalgia for a lost childhood and pursued for a crime he did not commit, fervently seeks his roots through a city that devours individual traces. Dimenberg when analysing the devices of film noir and the crime-solving aspect, states:

Beginning on the micro level of the evidentiary trace and moving to the larger frames of architecture and the city, the interplay of bodily detection and metropolitan representation pervades film noir. Just as the criminal body possesses specific identifying features, so does the metropolis.<sup>24</sup>

And he goes on quoting Benjamin about how 'the original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individuals traces in the big-city crowd' through the process of simultaneous segmentation of space and body which leads to the minor detail of the fingerprint.<sup>25</sup>



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<sup>23</sup> Hantke, Steffen. "Encapsulated Noir: Hybrid Genres and Social Mobility in Alex Proyas' *Dark City*." *Scope* 3 (2005). Web. 24 Nov. 2011. <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=3&id=84>

<sup>24</sup> Dimenberg, pg. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid pgs 26-27.





Fig. Set 4. The two instances of *Gesellschaft* in *Dark City*. Up: Dr. Schreber's rat maze which symbolises the actual city. Down: the Strangers' model of the city.

*Dark City* is a true dystopia which according to James Donald 'is not the opposite of utopia. It is hardly a plan to produce the irrational person. Rather, imagined dystopian cities are a projection of the inherent irrationality of interpersonal relations onto urban space'.<sup>26</sup> It is the familiar dysfunctional dystopia where citizens are under surveillance, subjugated by superior forces and subjected to technological control. Bearers of *Gesellschaft* in that sense are visually noticeable in two distinct frames of the film (Figure set 4), adding to the conventional narrative of the dystopia as is aptly described by Li Zhang and fits *Dark City* perfectly:

Dystopia, the antithesis of utopia, or utopia that has gone wrong, is a distinct, popular genre of literature and film in modern Western societies. It is often manifested in an imagined or future society completely controlled by an oppressive and corrupt government, or by forces of technologies beyond the original intention of human designers. [...] The city often figures centrally in the literary and cinematic representations of noir, a nightmarish kind of life that constantly haunts people in post-industrial societies.<sup>27</sup>

'The city is the dystopian novum, the shape of the prior catastrophe encoded deep within its social and architectural forms'.<sup>28</sup> It is both the set for the film and the space that is represented, at the same time. Proyas manages to 'give aesthetic form to the ephemeral

<sup>26</sup> Donald, James. "Sounds Like Hell: Beyond Dystopian Noise." *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*. By Gyan Prakash. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. 31-52. Print. pg. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Zhang, Li. "Postsocialist Urban Dystopia?" *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*. Ed. Gyan Prakash. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010. 127-49, pgs 128-129.

<sup>28</sup> Milner, pg. 267.

sensations and abrupt encounters of the cityscape', which would earn him the title of the 'modern artist' according to Baudelaire.<sup>29</sup> He created a diegetic palimpsest of memory, experience and identity by creating *Dark City*, and he inserted the imaginary non-place of Shell Beach: A banal, cliché utopia which exists only through the words [or pictures] that evoke it.<sup>30</sup>

Shell Beach plays a significant part in the film, as it symbolises the fundamental fantasy that any authoritarian regime employs so that the oppressed remain subdued. When the inhabitants are given the illusion of participation in a sunny setting that expands beyond the ideological control of the dark city, they are bound to remain docile. It is this fantasmatic quality that gives them the impression they know where Shell Beach is, but when asked to elaborate, it escapes them:

*John:* Hey, do you happen to know the way to Shell Beach?

*Cab Driver:* You're kidding. Me and the Mrs. spent our honeymoon there. All you gotta do is take Main Street west to... or is the Cross... that's funny, I can't seem to remember if it's Main Street west or the Crosstown.

If they were able to actually talk about it in detail and locate it precisely, the fantasy would be exposed and therefore no longer functional. Steffen Hantke, when comparing *Dark City* to *Metropolis*, makes a distinction between the disciplines imposed on each situation. For *Metropolis*, it is that of industrial economy which is 'enforced from outside and maintained through brutal oppression' but in *Dark City* the economy is post-industrial in which the citizens cooperate and conform due to their internalisation of the discipline. For Hantke Shell Beach is 'one of the products of such an economy, a commodity that simultaneously confirms the fiction of an alternative while actively foreclosing it'. In fact for Hantke

the purpose of the complex machinery underground is to produce such commodities [like Shell Beach], which, by means of their familiarity to the consumer, reproduce a need that is inauthentic but nonetheless persistent and predictable. Reproducing the conditions of their own manipulation, the consumers are sleepwalkers, unaware of the fact that their responses are monitored, their identities prefabricated, and their memories fake. They act out of false consciousness.

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<sup>29</sup> Gilloch, pg. 199.

<sup>30</sup> Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995, pg 95.

The motif of control and surveillance in the film reflects reality in the sense that Authority, in its desire to be omniscient and -if possible- omnipresent, places video surveillance cameras under the false pretence of security, and it approaches urban planning with the intention of mass control. Especially in America, city development plans entail destruction of the previous structures so that the new ones are built over them and render them inexistent and unmemorable. The history of each city does not remain visible, in a controversial attempt for urban renewal and therefore in an attempt to hide the past and reformulate the present. Like the Strangers in *Dark City* do, by regularly distorting memory and the physical structure of urban space through erasing what has preceded and substituting it with simulated forms. This practice gives them an all-pervasive control over their citizens who remain tame as long as they are not exposed to the secret mechanisms of manipulation. Because when they wake up from their manufactured dream, as in the case of John Murdoch, liberation and disorder will ensue. However what 'stands in the way of an authentic political act is the ideological control established by symbolic authority', namely the Strangers who devise and provide a world of meaning and its entire signification, for the people to exist and conform in; to function complacently within a reality that emerged out of nothing as a result of this provision of signification that eliminates all traces of what preceded it.<sup>31</sup>

As a matter of fact, this is what symbolic power does; it determines and disguises the past to the extent that it becomes so obscure and complicated that it serves their purpose of establishing an authority that goes unchallenged. Another great threat against humanity, as expressed several times in countless discourses, is the invisibility of power and our inability to locate it which of course gives it an unmatched advantage. The Strangers in *Dark City* remain underground both metaphorically and literally, as they are never seen by the inhabitants and only come to the surface through Proyas' cinematic lens that offers us an insight of how the director perceives the functioning of ideology in modern reality. In doing so, aiming for a visualisation of the aforementioned functioning, he gives Strangers the tangible ability to tune and consequently shape their social and architectural surroundings at will. An apt example of the social reformulation is found in the scene where a working class couple is having dinner in their shabby apartment, talking about the man's strenuous and far from rewarding working conditions, when the clock strikes twelve and the tuning begins.

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<sup>31</sup> McGowan, Todd. "Fighting Our Fantasies: Dark City and the Politics of Psychoanalysis." *Lacan and Contemporary Film*. By Sheila Kunkle. New York: Other, 2004. 145-72, pgs. 148-149.

The Strangers walk in with Dr. Schreber after the destitute family falls asleep, and they turn them into an affluent one: Their table triples in size, their whole home is transformed into a mansion and when they awaken, as if nothing happened they continue their conversation only now they are discussing about how the man rightfully fired a worker who complained about his working conditions.

It is an apparent illustration of how Authority and therefore Ideology have the power to move wealth around and distribute it at their pleasure, without attributing any significance to the commonly accepted, meritocratic criteria such as hard work and patience. The social order is rapidly re-arranged without people realising it -as has been the case in society up until now- since the masses compliantly endure any social transformation due to their lack of access to the workings of Ideology. Once again, Proyas' lens makes this visible for the audience by giving it the form of 'tuning' and at the same time offers a comic relief by playing with the stereotypes of each social class. However as Hantke argues 'it is perhaps the speed, as well as the seamlessness with which one social identity blends into another, that exposes a social viciousness underneath the harmless wish fulfilment'. What is more, Ideology does not restrict itself to just controlling what its deluded followers see; it also directs their standpoint. Be it mass media, legislation or any other instrument employed by Authority, a manipulated viewpoint is common truth today, successfully represented in the made up memories and hence identities injected by the Strangers, whose penetration into personal space knows no boundaries. As mentioned far above, Ideology recognises no limits when it comes to distorting the past, either. In fact it

is constantly reinterpreting the past, placing it within a new interpretive framework. That is to say, ideological revolutions do not simply change the way we relate to present events but also the way we relate to past ones. Ideology prompts us to see the past as the prelude to an inevitable present rather than as a time pregnant with other possibilities, possibilities that might challenge current ideological structures.<sup>32</sup>

The reason why Ideology is so intimidated by a possible glimpse on the past is because in the event that one turns to history in order to make sense of the world, they will realise that there in fact have been times when things were different. Therefore if a different

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<sup>32</sup> McGowan, pg. 151.

past is possible, so is a possible future, towards which people could struggle at the expense of Ideology. By creating the illusion that the people's present is the result of the natural order of things -a legitimate continuation of past experiences- the Strangers make the 'images and memories of the past serve as *the* ideological justification of the present'.<sup>33</sup> Since 'Ideological control is a symbolic, rather than an imaginary, process', then how does one enhance its image after it has been actualised?<sup>34</sup> This is where the quality of paranoia comes in, evident in John's disorientation and personified in the character of Dr. Schreber<sup>35</sup> whose name betrays Proyas' intentions: Ideological control is paranoid and so is its image. Murdoch is the one who creates a more realistic 'reality' and brings it back to sanity. He transforms 'the city into a locus of reading and remembering' by constructing Shell Beach and leaving people's memories intact so that they can naturally unfold unrestrained.<sup>36</sup> He becomes the *flâneur* who 'is heroic in exemplifying contradictory moments in the city: on the one hand, the ruination of experience and the fragmentation of memory; on the other, the decipherment of meaning and the recollection of lost moments; [...] a 'heroic' pedestrian'.<sup>37</sup>

When Murdoch as an individual acts authentically, McGowan explains that 'this act fundamentally transforms existing social arrangements and thus has a collective import'.<sup>38</sup> More specifically:

Murdoch gradually uncovers the (ideological) manipulation performed by the Strangers and eventually defeats them, breaking their hold over the city. Murdoch's individual act of freeing himself from the ideological hold of the Strangers has the effect of freeing the entire society from their control as well.<sup>39</sup>

A form of control that fails as shown at the beginning when Murdoch wakes up. As Detective Walenski (who goes insane because he cannot cope with the immense gravity of his realisation), tells Murdoch: 'once in a while one of us wakes up while they're changing things. It's not supposed to happen, but it does'. However, in contrast to Walenski, when Murdoch reaches the image of Shell Beach which is nothing more than a dividing wall

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid pg. 153.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid pg. 154.

<sup>35</sup> A psychotic German judge who suffered from paranoia and is the author of the journal *Memoirs of My Mental Illness* (1903).

<sup>36</sup> Gilloch, pg. 214.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid pg 214.

<sup>38</sup> McGowan, pg 147.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid pg. 148.

between the city and infinite space, he is strong enough to handle the collapse of his worldview and at the same time the breakdown of the ideological structure the city had relied on up to that point.

Conclusively, *Dark City* becomes the setting of an urban dystopia. A space under technological control and surveillance with its citizens subdued by an oligarchic elite whose priority is their own special interest. In that sense it resembles Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* with the difference that Proyas envisages revolution stemming from an individual who 'wakes up' and fights them with their own weapons, whilst Lang sees hope in the solidarity of the suppressed mass. A suppressed mass that in both films is represented as undergoing the challenging experience of living in the big city; an experience which aptly corresponds to how Georg Simmel sees it in his work, as accounted of in this essay. By employing the devices of film noir, Proyas communicates how he perceives this urban experience. In inventing 'tuning' he materialises the workings of Ideology and Authority which he envisions as lacking entities and therefore vulnerable to change at their expense. Indeed, they do not just oppress their subjects; they also need them in order to survive as is the case of the Strangers who need to find what constitutes humanity in order to remain 'alive'. Therefore the protagonist after he awakes, he gets exposed to the truth and takes advantage of that susceptibility. He uses 'tuning' and his memories against them, in a victorious triumph over the dark powers that be, thus actualising the proverbial urgency of the oppressed to 'wake up' and 'see'.

# Arte e Architettura o Arte per l'architettura? Il dibattito critico statunitense dalla seconda metà del Novecento

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## Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the relationship between architecture and art and the related critical debate since the second half of 20th century. After the Second World War the architects felt the need to create open spaces in the areas in front of buildings. The institutions were not immune to this, and they launched important measures for the construction of these spaces and the integration of art and architecture in them (Plaza Law, Art in Architecture, Art in Public Spaces etc.). From these premises came a critical debate that sought to highlight the synergies and possible points of contact between the architect and the artist, both involved in the creative and constructive process.

“Separate alla nascita, arte visiva e architettura  
sono gemelle per molti versi identiche.  
Il loro seme comune è progettare un pensiero visualizzato,  
anche se la realizzazione si prevede in calcestruzzo,  
in mosaico o attraverso un poster.”

Angela Vettese<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Parole di ANGELA VETTESE cit. in VILMA TORSSELLI (2004), “Public Art e Architettura”, in *Antitesi*, 27 novembre.

Negli Stati Uniti l'esigenza di restituire ai cittadini spazi per l'interazione sociale, fu avvertita soprattutto al termine della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, periodo in cui la popolazione americana subì un incremento pari al 45%<sup>2</sup>. Gli spazi erano per lo più privati e tendenti all'isolamento dell'individuo rispetto alla comunità: le strade furono rimpiazzate dalle autostrade, le automobili si preferivano alle metropolitane e al trasporto pubblico e così via. Nel secondo dopoguerra, l'architettura era dominata dal pensiero modernista teorizzato da Le Corbusier il cui motto, "we must build in the open"<sup>3</sup>, spinse gli architetti verso la creazione di spazi aperti nelle zone circostanti gli edifici. Esempio, sotto questo punto di vista, fu la costruzione, ultimata nel 1958, del *Seagram Building*, imponente edificio newyorkese, fornito di una piazza antistante l'ingresso (fig. 1). La creazione di siffatti spazi pubblici ridestò l'attenzione anche delle istituzioni a tal punto che, nel 1961, la città di New York varò la cosiddetta *Plaza Law*<sup>4</sup> che quasi imponeva legislativamente la costruzioni di spazi del genere in concomitanza con la nascita di nuovi edifici<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> JON C. TEAFORD (1993), *The Twentieth Century American City*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> LE CORBUSIER (1929), "The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning", ristampato nel volume RICHARD T. LEGATES, FREDERIC STOUT (a cura di) (1996), *The City Reader*, London: Routledge, p. 373.

<sup>4</sup> Per ulteriori approfondimenti sulla questione rimando a NORMAN MARCUS (1992), "Notes on New York City Zoning - 1961-1991: Turning Back the Clock - But with an Up-to-the-Minute Social Agenda", in *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, vol. 19, Spring, p. 715.

<sup>5</sup> La *Plaza Law* fu definita, sulle pagine del *New York Times*, come "a tremendous victory in the cause of building a better city of future", cit. in "Editorial", *New York Times*, 16 dicembre 1960, p. 32.





Figure 1 Il *Seagram Building* di Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, 1958, visto dal vecchio edificio della CBS in Madison Avenue, New York, USA, (© Erick Christian Alvarez Soto).

In quegli stessi anni, sulla scia di progetti avviati già nel decennio precedente, urbanisti, architetti e istituzioni cittadine e statali, avviarono programmi di rigenerazione urbana e di sviluppo di nuove aree da destinare alla popolazione. Tuttavia, questi progetti non ebbero l'esito sperato riducendosi soltanto ad una distruzione di vecchi edifici e quartieri e alla loro ricostruzione in chiave modernista. Ciò di cui si avvertiva la mancanza era la poca attenzione rivolta all'ambito sociale nel quale questi programmi trovavano attuazione.

In un articolo, datato 1965, apparso sulle pagine della rivista di architettura *Architectural Forum*, la questione fu duramente affrontata e fu criticata l'assoluta mancanza

della nozione di *architectural determinism*, ovvero dell'esigenza di stabilire un incessante dialogo ed un continuo raffronto tra lo spazio fisico e l'ambiente sociale<sup>6</sup>.

In un contesto così problematico, come quello appena descritto, l'arte era, almeno in prima istanza, del tutto assente, dovendosi preoccupare, come aveva già sostenuto il critico Clement Greenberg, soltanto di problematiche interne all'arte stessa<sup>7</sup>. Questa posizione di purezza estetica assunta da Greenberg, che finì con l'influenzare molto del fare artistico successivo, non è stata esente da critiche e fu attaccata, soprattutto, dallo studioso Thomas Crow nel suo saggio *Modern Art in the Common Culture*<sup>8</sup>, nel quale reputava assurdo il sostenere che l'arte "hunted back to their mediums"<sup>9</sup>.

E' evidente che le teorie portate avanti ad Greenberg, sono, comunque, frutto di un periodo storico in cui il grande sviluppo di musei d'arte forniva "protezione" all'oggetto artistico isolandolo dal mondo esterno.

A tal proposito, Michael Brenson, arriva alla conclusione che malgrado l'intenzione di relazionarsi con i problemi della quotidianità, molte opere del periodo in questione sono state influenzate dal contesto al quale erano destinate: "the healing power of images now seems limited. Most of the responses of modernist painting and sculpture dislocation, displacement and injustice found their homes in living room, galleries and museums. The museums with which modernist painting is identified are now establishment institutions whose curatorial decision inevitably defend the social and the economic interests of their well-heeled and mostly white corporate boards of trustees. The increasing isolation of modernist painting and sculpture from the texture of the world in which they were created has reinforced the view that Modernism is now itself both a symptom and a victim of the fragmentation and divisiveness many modernist artist tried, in their own way to heal"<sup>10</sup>.

Le tesi di Greenberg e le modalità urbanistiche post-belliche, subirono un duro attacco a partire dagli anni Sessanta del secolo scorso. Nel 1961, infatti, in *The Death and the Life of Great American Cities*, Mary Jane Jacobs criticò duramente l'idea lecorbusiana di

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<sup>6</sup> JAMES BAILEY (1965), "The Case History of a Failure", in *Architectural Forum*, vol. 123, December, pp. 22-26.

<sup>7</sup> Su questa idea è costruito il saggio Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon", in C. GREENBERG (1986), *The Collected Essays of Clement Greenberg*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>8</sup> THOMAS E. CROW (1996), *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

<sup>9</sup> C. GREENBERG, *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> MICHAEL BRENSON, "Healing in Time", in MARY JANE JACOB, M. BRENSON, EVA M. OLSON (a cura di) (1995), *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, Seattle: Bay Press, p. 28.

architettura e di rinnovamento urbano sostenendo che “he was planning for social Utopia” caratterizzata da “maximum individual liberty, by which he seems to have meant not liberty to do anything much, but liberty from ordinary responsibility”<sup>11</sup>. A questo individualismo la curatrice e critica americana contrappone un intricato sistema di relazioni che definisce *art of the city* e che rende il singolo soggetto parte integrante di un *urban ballet*<sup>12</sup>. E’ interessante sottolineare che il saggio in questione fu pubblicato nello stesso anno in cui, come detto, fu varata la *Plaza Law*: la Jacob considerava la creazione di questi spazi non come un’occasione di integrazione, ma piuttosto come zone che avrebbero respinto e non attratto i passanti. La studiosa auspicava, al contrario, l’investimento su processi di costruzione più democratici che includessero al loro interno anche la voce di chi poi di questi spazi ne avrebbe fruito.

Le tesi sostenute dalla Jacob hanno riscontrato, qualche anno dopo, grande consenso: a partire dalla metà degli anni Sessanta, infatti, furono varate, sotto la presidenza Johnson, numerose leggi destinate a politiche di sviluppo urbano incentrate sulla partecipazione delle persone nei processi di rigenerazione<sup>13</sup>. Nella stessa direzione del saggio della Jacob, si indirizzava il volume *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*<sup>14</sup>, pubblicato da Robert Venturi nel 1966 che attaccava l’impostazione modernista del fare architettura, reputando indispensabile una concezione urbanistica intesa come sintesi di valori non solo estetici, ma anche sociali (argomento detestato da LeCorbusier). In questo periodo la pianificazione urbanistica di stampo modernista andò in crisi e architetti ed urbanisti orientarono il loro lavoro verso pratiche più interdisciplinari e maggiormente aderenti ai bisogni della comunità. Fu in tale contesto che l’arte riaffermò il suo valore e la sua reintroduzione nei contesti di riassetto urbano coincise con il varo della legge del *Percent For Art* (secondo la quale l’1% dei capitali destinati alla costruzione di nuove opere architettoniche doveva obbligatoriamente essere riservato all’introduzione di opere d’arte nell’architettura stessa)<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> M. J. JACOB (1961), *The Death and the Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Per ulteriori approfondimenti a riguardo rimando a JOHN HULL MOLLENKPOF (1983), *The Contested City*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>14</sup> ROBERT VENTURI (1966), *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>15</sup> Bisogna, però, tener presente che l’utilizzo di parte del capitale d’investimento per l’architettura da riservare all’arte era una pratica esistente, negli Stati Uniti, già dagli anni Trenta. Tuttavia, questa pratica non era obbligatoria e la gran parte degli architetti del periodo erano contrari all’utilizzo di decorazioni estetiche per le loro strutture.

La prima città, negli Stati Uniti, a varare tale disposizione fu Philadelphia che, nel 1959, la applicò con il nome di *Aesthetic Ornamentation of City Structure*<sup>16</sup>.

Le ragioni di ciò sono facilmente rintracciabili nelle parole di Michael von Maschzisker, uno dei finanziatori di nuove strutture architettoniche per la città in causa: “Spread the message that fine arts must be returned to American architecture; that sterility and her handmaiden, monotony, must be banished from our avenues”<sup>17</sup>.

Il dibattito che scaturì da questa nuova modalità di intervento artistico, riguardò soprattutto il rapporto tra arte ed architettura. Sono interessanti le parole dello studioso Tom Finkelpearl che, riferendosi al periodo in questione, affermò che “just as architects were demonized as the destroyers of the city, artists were unrealistically asked to salvage it”. L’assunto di base da cui si partiva era l’idea che l’artista e l’architetto dovessero collaborare al fine di rendere l’architettura più umana e più vicina alle aspettative di chi di essa ne fruiva. Tuttavia, raramente vi fu una reale e leale collaborazione: ciò che spesso viene vista come collaborazione, infatti, non è altro che il risultato di un frustrante processo di concessioni e compromessi. Sono, a tal proposito, illuminati le parole di Vito Acconci sulla questione. Ad una domanda postagli durante un’intervista riguardante il ruolo dell’artista nelle commissioni di arte pubblica, così rispose:

“When you’re asked to do a public art project, you’re asked to do something that’s peripheral to the building designed by the architect; you’re asked to do something on the margin; you don’t get the main space, you’re put in the corner. And sometimes it’s worse than that; we’ve been working a long time on a project where the architects are saying things like ‘Well, we need some art overlay here’. So the artist is asked to provide something like paint, wallpaper, or a carpet. Or sometimes not even that; some architects want their walls and floors to be left alone, untampered with; so, what they want is floating art, maybe an ‘art float’, separate from their walls, from their floor. As a public artist, you’re asked to do something extra, something unnecessary. The ticket counters have been designed, the transfer corridors have been designed, all of the the airport that’s actually needed and usable has already been designed by the architect.; yet the city has a One Percent for Art Law, so art has to come in at the last minute, like a *deus ex machina*, like an architect’s nightmare. [...] There shouldn’t be a separate field called ‘public art’, there should be only architecture, only

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<sup>16</sup> PENNY BALKIN BACH (1996), *Public Art in Philadelphia*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

landscape architecture; there should be architecture projects, that everyone - including so-called artists - can apply for. Public art gives an excuse to say: this is like architecture, but it isn't really architecture"<sup>18</sup>.

La questione sembra essere, dunque, la dipendenza di una disciplina dall'altra e la poca autonomia e libertà lasciata agli interventi artistici.

Negli Stati Uniti, la necessità di dotare edifici di un corredo artistico si manifestò con grande impatto nel 1963 con il programma statale *Art in Architecture* (promosso dalla *General Service Administration*), cui obiettivo era quello di sfruttare la vigente legislazione del *percent for art* al fine di favorire la crescita dell'arte contemporanea americana. Il programma fu sospeso nel 1966 a causa dell'aumento dei costi di costruzione, per essere ripreso, sotto la presidenza Nixon, nel 1972. *Art in Architecture* fissò, forse per la prima volta, alcuni dei precetti chiave su cui doveva basarsi la *public art* americana: in primo luogo, l'arte sarebbe stata veramente pubblica soltanto nel momento in cui era, letteralmente, di proprietà dei cittadini<sup>19</sup>; in secondo luogo, ciò che si ricercava era un'interdipendenza tra spazio pubblico e opera d'arte, cosa che, in qualche modo, avvicinava il programma alle pratiche *site-specific*.

La scelta di collocare opere d'arte in contesti non istituzionali, sviluppatasi, come detto, in seguito ai programmi legati al *percent for art*, si diffuse presto nella gran parte delle città americane. Dopo Philadelphia che, pionieristicamente, si dotò di un tale corredo artistico, altre città come Baltimora (1964), San Francisco (1967) e Seattle (1973) adottarono politiche simili. Questi primi esperimenti, tuttavia, non andavano ad incidere minimamente sul tessuto sociale del contesto in cui avevano luogo, limitandosi a offrire soluzioni esteticamente valide e compatibili con le pre-esistenti strutture architettoniche<sup>20</sup>. Molti dei lavori scelti per *Art in Architecture*, ad esempio, diedero un forte impulso al proliferare della cosiddetta *pop art*, dal momento che la selezione delle stesse avveniva secondo il criterio che "a successful museum or gallery artist would be a successful public artist"<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> TOM FINKELPEARL, "Interview: Vito Accoci on Art, Architecture, Arvada, and StoreFront", in T. Finkelpearl (2000), *Dialogues in Public Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 175-176.

<sup>19</sup> In realtà il programma era finanziato da agenzie federali, ma i cittadini percepivano le opere d'arte come qualcosa di loro appartenenza.

<sup>20</sup> STEPHEN S. PROKOPOFF, "The Government as Patron", in Barbalee Diamonstein (a cura di) (1981), *Collaboration: Artist and Architects*, New York: Whitney Library of Design, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> HARRIET F. SENIE (1992), *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation and Controversy*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 230.

Nel 1967, il *National Endowment for the Arts*, si fece promotore di un altro programma incentrato sulla collocazione di opere d'arte in spazio pubblici: l' *Art in Public Places Program*. Le radici di questo programma le si rintracciano in una tassa federale, imposta nel 1965, i cui introiti sarebbe stati riservati esclusivamente per la promozione statale di opere d'arte. In tal modo l'arte diventava parte integrante per il "national's well-being"<sup>22</sup> e il supporto alla cultura era stabilito da "a legitimate government responsibility"<sup>23</sup>.

Gli obiettivi del programma erano: accrescere la consapevolezza verso l'arte contemporanea; sviluppare nuove pratiche per una rivalutazione tanto estetica quanto sociale degli spazi pubblici; offrire ai giovani artisti, specialmente a quelli americani, un'opportunità per lavorare in contesti pubblici; supportare la sperimentazione artistica; coinvolgere in maniera diretta la comunità nei processi di commissione e di installazione delle opere. Quest'ultimo punto è di fondamentale importanza in quanto, secondo Brian O'Doherty, segnò "a crucial change in perspective which removed the idea of the Federal Government imposing art works on communities that ha no option but to accept or reject them"<sup>24</sup>.

Il dibattito critico sull'argomento ha posto in essere una grave contraddizione in termini per quanto concerne gli obiettivi del programma. Se le dinamiche da cui parte sono caratterizzate da un grande egualitarismo, esse non tengono in considerazione quei processi attraverso i quali l'arte diventa pubblica: le opere scelte finiscono, dunque, per relazionarsi con lo spazio esclusivamente in maniera fisica. Ci si trova a discutere di "art made public, outside the home or museum"<sup>25</sup>.

La prima opera collocata in spazi pubblici grazie al programma *Art in Public Place* fu la *Grand Vitesse* di Alexander Calder (fig. 2) a Grand Rapids, nello stato del Michigan. La commissione che seguì la vicenda, come sottolineato da Beardsley, non puntò ad un tentativo di rigenerazione urbana, ma perseguì più modesti obiettivi limitandosi a selezionare un lavoro

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<sup>22</sup> HOWARD J. SMAGULA (1983), *Currents: Contemporary Directions in the Visual Arts*, Englewood: Prentice Hall Inc., p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> ANDREW BUCHWALTER (a cura di) (1992), *Culture and Democracy: Social and Ethical Issues in Public Support for the Arts and Humanities*, Boulder: Westview, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> BRIAN O'DOHERTY (1974), "Public Art and the Government: A Progress Report", in *Art in America*, 62.3, May-June, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> JOHN BEARDSLEY (1981), "Personal Sensibilities in Public Places", in *Artforum*, 19.10, June/Summer, p. 43; JOHN ALLEN, "How Art Becomes Public", in JEFFREY L. CRUIKSHANK, PAM KORZA (a cura di) (1985), *Going Public: A Field Guide to Developments in Art in Public Spaces*, Amherst: Arts Extension Service in cooperation with the Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, p. 246.

di un noto artista da collocare come *focus point* per la piazza della città<sup>26</sup>. Sebbene l'opera in questione in un primo momento non riscosse il consenso sperato, oggi la *Grand Vitesse* è diventata un simbolo della città di Grand Rapids, quasi un logo che la identifica e differenzia da altre località<sup>27</sup>.



Figure 2 Alexander Calder, *Grand Vitesse*, 1969, acciaio dipinto, 13 m × 9.1 m × 16 m, Civic Center (downtown), Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA (© Brian Burch)

Il dibattito sull'argomento fu seguito, in quegli stessi anni, con grande attenzione, anche in ambito sociologico. Non bisogna dimenticare che il periodo in questione, gli anni Settanta del Novecento, fu colpito in pieno da quei cambiamenti, sociali, economici, culturali e di pianificazione urbana, legati all'avvento della post-modernità. Henry Lefebvre, in *Il diritto alla città*, porta avanti la tesi secondo la quale l'integrazione dell'arte nelle strutture urbane non si limitava ad essere un ingentilimento dello spazio, quanto piuttosto svolgeva un ruolo di

<sup>26</sup> J. BEARDSLEY (1981), *Art in Public Places*, Washington: Partners for Livable Communities, pp. 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> Per rendersi conto di ciò basti considerare che l'opera di Calder è stampata, come simbolo della città, persino sui camion adoperati per la raccolta dei rifiuti.

fondamentale importanza anche per lo sviluppo di valori sociali legati al quotidiano, facendosi, in tal modo, *praxis* e *poiesis*: “l’avvenire dell’arte non è estetico, ma urbano”<sup>28</sup>.

Su una posizione diversa si attestò Jean Baudrillard che, nel 1975, mostrava, nel suo saggio *The Orders of Simulacra*, la sua reticenza ad accettare una estetizzazione del quotidiano, arrivando ad affermare che ciò avrebbe comportato la distruzione del concetto di arte.

“Today, when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality, the aesthetic fascination is everywhere [...]. A kind of non-intentional parody hovers over everything, of technical simulation, of indefinable fame to which is attached an aesthetic pleasure [...]. And so art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality. And so art is dead, not only because its critical transcendence is gone, but because reality itself, entirely impregnated by aesthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image”<sup>29</sup>.

Nel 1982 l’*Institute of Contemporary Art* di Londra ospitò la *Art and Architecture Conference* per discutere sullo sviluppo e sulla crescita dell’utilizzo dell’arte in contesti pubblici ed architettonici.

In tale occasione, i contributi di architetti come Theo Crosby, Charles Jencks e Will Alsop, servirono a gettare le basi per una collaborazione costruttiva con gli artisti che avesse i fruitori al centro di ogni progetto e la studiosa Deanne Petherbridge, nel saggio *Art for Architecture*, mise in evidenza come “the coming together of artists and architects has always marked a period of creative vitality in Western cultural history. Such collaboration was central to the Italian Renaissance and left its mark on the fabric of cities as richly as it endowed palaces and churches”<sup>30</sup>.

In questi stessi anni, una lucida analisi del rapporto arte-architettura, fu portata avanti dall’artista iraniano (naturalizzato statunitense) Siah Armajani il quale sottolineò come il suo lavoro “is not meant to enhance architecture, or to alter it, but to be one in the other, like water in a glass. The public place engulfs us both”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> HENRI LEFEBVRE (1972), *Il diritto alla città*, Padova: Marsilio Editori, pp. 152-153.

<sup>29</sup> JEAN BAUDRILLARD (1975), “The Orders of Simulacra”, in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Parigi: Excerpta, pp. 150-152.

<sup>30</sup> DEANNA PETHERBRIDGE (1987), *Art for Architecture*, London: HMSO, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> CALVIN TOMKINS (1983), “Like Water in a Glass”, in *The New Yorker*, 21 marzo, p. 92.



Qualche anno più tardi, nel 1991, Sandy Nairne, all'epoca direttore delle sezione arti visive presso l'*Arts Council* e attualmente direttore della *National Portrait Gallery* di Londra, sostenne che vi era uno stretto legame tra la buona architettura e il meglio dell'arte contemporanea<sup>32</sup>, legame che, tuttavia, secondo il curatore Andrew Brighton, non sempre portava ad esiti positivi, dal momento che “when artists and architects collaborate, each challenges the other's professional ideology”<sup>33</sup>, reputando la collaborazione arte-architettura come “the almost obscene spectacle of an attempt to create siamese twins out of two corpses which produces decorative kitsch and authoritatively, banal buildings”<sup>34</sup>. Sebbene di grande importanza, il contributo di Brighton al dibattito sull'argomento, penso, sia troppo incentrato sulla distanza tra la funzionalità di un oggetto e la sua valenza estetica. Per il critico inglese, infatti, non era ammissibile che un architetto, per il quale il valore funzionale è di primaria importanza, lavorasse dovendo tener conto anche di giudizi estetici.

Il problema del rapporto arte-architettura, secondo il critico Jeff Kelley, spesso si risolve in un fraintendimento, da parte degli architetti e degli artisti, sul ruolo loro destinato all'interno dell'intero progetto. Se da un lato gli architetti pensano che si vogliano realizzare interventi artistici che offuschino il progetto architettonico o che vogliano diventare architettura stessa, dall'altro gli artisti vedono nel modo di lavorare degli architetti un tentativo di trasportare l'architettura nel campo dell'arte<sup>35</sup>. Sarebbe auspicabile che tanto gli architetti quanto gli artisti diventino parte integrante di un unico processo creativo in modo che “an artist's work may be more like verb than a noun, visible not only in space but over time”<sup>36</sup>.

Nel dibattito, più recentemente, è intervenuta anche Barbara Goldstein, direttrice del programma di *public art* per la città di San Josè. Secondo la curatrice la difficoltà di collaborazione deriva, soprattutto, dal tipo di prodotto che si va a realizzare; il fare arte, infatti, è di solito qualcosa di più diretto rispetto al fare architettura: se gli artisti, durante il processo creativo, non sempre necessitano di una visione d'insieme del risultato della loro

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<sup>32</sup> ART COUNCIL (1991), *Percent for Art: a Review*, London, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> ANDREW BRIGHTON (1993), “Flogging Dead Horses”, in *Things are not as they seem*, Canterbury: Kent Institute of Art and Design, p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> JEFF KELLEY, “Common Work”, in SUZANNE LACY (1995), *Mapping the Terrain, New Genre Public Art*, Seattle: Bay Press, pp. 139-148.

<sup>36</sup> Ivi, p. 140.

attività, al contrario gli architetti hanno bisogno, sin dall'inizio del lavoro, di conoscere il prodotto finale sul quale interagire con gli artisti<sup>37</sup>.

Tuttavia, qualunque sia il presupposto critico da cui si parte, per una corretta interpretazione del rapporto tra arte e architettura non bisogna mai dimenticare che, secondo quanto sostenuto da Cristina Bechtler, “gli architetti traggono spesso ispirazione dall’arte contemporanea, non solo dalla sua presenza tattile, fisica e dal trattamento fantasioso dei materiali, ma anche dall’investigazione analitica che opera sulla società. Arte e architettura si ritrovano in un dialogo reciprocamente fruttifero. L’architettura più innovativa propone soluzioni che incorporano strategie artistiche; mentre il contenuto di molta arte si può spesso mettere in relazione a dati architettonici”<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> BARBARA GOLDSTEIN, “The Artist and the Design Team”, in B. Goldstein (a cura di) (2005), *Public Art by the Book*, Seattle: Americans for the Arts in association with University of Washington, p. 122.

<sup>38</sup> CRISTINA BECHTLER (a cura di) (2005), *Immagini d'architettura - Architettura d'immagini. Conversazione tra Jacques Herzog e Jeff Wall*, Milano: PostmediaBooks.



# The social mission of art

Max Simon Nordau<sup>1</sup>

There exists a school of aestheticism which laughs contemptuously at the mere sight of this superscription. Art having a mission! What utter nonsense. A person must be a rank Philistine to connect with the idea of art the conception of a non- artistic mission, be it social or otherwise. Has a work of art any other mission than to give pleasure by beauty? It strives to attain no goal that lies outside of itself It is its own object, and whoever assigns to it another, sins against the sanctity of art.

This is, in short, the theory of art for art's sake: *l'art pour l'art*. I deem this theory false and a hallmark of crass ignorance, for psychology and the history of civilisation and art, the history of all arts, prove irrefutably the vanity and worthlessness of the concept that denies to art any other task and mission than that of being beautiful.

Certainly art is, in the main, a purely subjective activity, in which the artist wishes solely to satisfy himself, without thinking of any person or thing external to himself. The psychological roots of all artistic creation are, in fact, an exceptional sensitiveness and feeling on the part of the artist. We know that every moderately strong impression which man — and, moreover, not only man, but also every living creature, however low in the scale — receives from the external world, excites in him processes, which, in the case of man and the higher animals, attain consciousness as emotion or passion. The emotion imperiously urges in towards liberation through movements, that is to say, muscular activity, which, in many cases, is accompanied by glandular activity, e.g. tears, secretion of saliva, perspiration, etc. To men of the average type the usual forms of manifesting their emotion suffice. If they have wept in sorrow, laughed for joy, cursed or clenched their fist in anger, they are pacified. Their

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<sup>1</sup> Max Simon Nordau, "The social mission of Art", On Art and Artists, trans. by W. F. Harvey, M.A. (1907), Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co. Publishers.

emotion has spent itself and become exhausted, and their physical life once more flows in its accustomed channels.

However, if, instead of the average man, we have before us a creature of exceptional sensitiveness and emotionality, the psychical processes assume another shape. This creature feels all phenomena more acutely; they arouse in him more violent passions; his emotions are deeper and more lasting. Their normal forms of expression do not suffice to lull them. They take possession of his soul, organise themselves, show a tendency to become compelling ideas, and oppress it with psycho-motorial incitements or impulses until it has freed itself from them by acts which stand in proper ratio to the number or violence of the emotions. A being whose excessive emotionality is of an angry, malicious nature attains relief only through deeds of destruction. Such is the case with most sub-species of born criminals. Should the exceptionally strong emotions not be of a destructive nature, they find their outlet otherwise by artistic creations, which, therefore, are a liberation and solution of emotion that has become overmastering.

But this simple, as it were, normal case, in which the work of art actually fulfils a purely subjective mission, and aims at no other object than to relieve the artist's nervous system and to unburden his mind of a compelling idea — this case is actually met with only in the earliest ages of mankind. Art for art's sake — the art which is practised purely for the relief and satisfaction of the artist — is that of the cave-man of the quaternary period. The artist who adorned the walls of the Caves of Mouthe (In the department of Doubs) with figures of animals; who scratched the famous mammoth on the tusk of La Madeleine in the Dordogne; the draughtsman of Bruniquel, of Schaffhausen; the author of the rock-pictures in Sweden, probably did not trouble himself as to whether he was producing any effect on others.

In all likelihood he did not work for society. His psychology is disclosed to us by the subjects he treated. He was an enthusiastic hunter, endowed with a particularly lively intuition and manual dexterity. Oh the days when he could not go hunting, either because bad weather prevented him doing so, or external compulsion — perhaps an accident met with in the chase — confined him to his cave, he thought longingly of his favourite occupation. The beasts that composed his usual booty lived in his imagination. His grotto was peopled with the monsters of the forest and plain of primitive times. He saw the mammoth with its stiff mane, the grisly cave-bear, the aurochs and giant-elk, the shaggy, thick-set horse of

Solutr; he pursued, fought, slew them. He felt all the keen joys of these mighty deeds, and became so strongly excited that he could not refrain from realising the lively pictures of his fancy, by drawing them on bones, tusks, or rocks, or carving them on stags "horns and elephants" teeth. It would not gainsay this psychology of primitive human art, if the artists in remote ages (as the latest pre-historic investigations seem to attest) connected superstitious ideas with the imitation of their animals of the chase, perhaps believed by such means they cast a spell on the animals portrayed, and facilitated their capture.

A superstition like this would, in its turn, become a source of fresh emotions which also seek outward expression.

Besides the hunter there was also the warrior, who liked to portray his conquered enemies, and the sensualist, who sought delight in carving female busts, the types of which, to our taste, seem very ugly, but may have appeared alluring to him.

These savage forefathers who adorned the caves of the early stone age with works of art not invariably crude ; who woke the echo of the forest valleys with plaintive or yearning melodies; who excited themselves by sensuous dances in the moonlight nights of spring; who formed, in symbolic and allegorical songs, their mystic impressions of the great phenomena of the weather and sky; – these savage forefathers were the first, but at the same time last, purely subjective artists, the only real believers in the dogma of "art for art's sake."

In order to find them once more in our own times, we must seek them in the nursery or the Board School classroom. The artist of primitive times survives by atavism in the child. But he substitutes for the rock-wall of the cave and the mammoth's tooth his slate, copy-book, school-books, often enough his desk and form, which he adorns with drawings that, if not particularly finished, are, nevertheless, always full of expression, and recognisable. The child does not give way to his artistic wantonness in order to please others. He hides it, moreover, mostly for obvious reasons, from the eyes of strangers; he only draws to portray symbolically that which has made a strong impression on him. He always notes down the important, distinguishing features which have struck him in the phenomenon. This fierce moustache, the circle drawn across which represents the head, is for the little draughtsman the characteristic of manly dignity; this right-angled broken stroke, which bristles up over a row of men, is the formidable bayonet that marks the soldier; this disproportionately big stick in another man's hand is the dreaded badge that embodies the schoolmaster's power.

The young artist has obeyed genuine impulses. His art forms really spring out of the deep grounds of his emotion.

With advancing civilisation, however, this state of things quickly changes. The artist soon notices that he is differently conditioned to the rest, the average men; that his feelings are keener, their manifestation more expressive than with the latter.

He becomes conscious of his superiority, fancies himself something in regard to it, and cultivates it.

Other men find aesthetic pleasure in his creations, and encourage him by flattering applause which easily rises to admiration. That calls forth an energetic metamorphosis in the inmost processes of his work, in its causes and aims. What was once organic necessity now becomes craftsmanship; uncontrollable inspiration is replaced by custom and by style. The artist becomes his own imitator.

In years of cool, methodical, routine work, he simply calls to mind the moment when the feverish workings of his brain powerfully drove him into the paths of art. He observes all rites of the creator by impulse, but they are now only an attitude which he has learnt. In theory he is still inspired by impulse; practically, he is a professional craftsman who performs the day's work imposed on him by intelligent volition. He is still always in search of self-satisfaction whilst engaged on works of art, but it is of another nature than that of the unsophisticated artist. The unconscious aim of his efforts is not to find relief from an emotional tension: he strives after the voluptuous feeling of flattered *amour propre* he grows ambitious, very often, indeed, only vain. He thinks of his public. He anticipates his success. The thought of approbation takes the place of the effort to deliver himself from a painfully obsessing conception.

This also is always the psychology of the born artist, who is one because his organisation forces him to it. Beside him, however, swarms the innumerable crowd of imitation artists, of average, and very average men, who would never of themselves have thought of becoming artists – men who would never have discovered art of themselves, if they had not had before their eyes the example of the original artists, their successes, their recognition by civilised society. These individuals pursue art, not to deliver themselves from an obsessing conception, but as a means of attaining privileges, gold, and honours. For them art is an avocation like any other, a trade learnt, which is to bring them, not to subjective

psychological, but to practical and social ends. They try by a sort of mimicry to become like the original artists, but they belong to another species. Nevertheless, it is not permissible to neglect them in this consideration, for, for one thing, they constitute the vast majority of artists, from the moment when the pursuit of art has become a differentiated activity, the habitual and exclusive occupation of a separate class of society; and then the productions of these imitators are always modelled after works done through organic necessity.

They are, to a certain extent, the small change of originally great values; they would like to be changed for them, and everything which is to be said of any particular problem of art, necessarily finds its application to the imitations as well as to the original pictures.

These are then the origins and stages of development of art. At the outset, it is actually what the school of "art for art's sake" asserts of it: a subjective purpose, a satisfaction of an organic need on the part of the artist. Soon, however, the artist ceases to confine himself to satisfying himself in relieving himself; he also seeks to please others. In the most secret and mysterious moments of creation, the thought of other men is present in his mind; considerations as to effect and success are mixed with his productive emotions. Substitute mere craftsmanship for inspiration, then these considerations become more and more dominant, and when art has once become a regular ordinary business, and the imitators, the mere echoes and reflections, have once become the majority among those who practise it, then the artist has his eyes continually fixed on his tribunal, viz., society. In the moment his work of art is germinating, it is strongly influenced by consideration of the known or the supposed taste of the society whose applause the artist courts, and the work undergoes a development more or less remote from the form it would have acquired under the pure influence of emotion, its primary source.

Society naturally sees what place it occupies in the artist's mind, what share it has in his creations, and how important to him its verdict is. It promptly perceives its advantage. It takes possession of the artist, forces its tastes on him, and insists on his working, not for himself, but for it. Henceforward it has in him a paid servant; he has to conform his special energy to the general plan of the society organism of which he is a part, and, in this way, a manifestation which was originally a purely subjective performance becomes a social performance.



Art, engendered by individual emotion and transfigured into a social work, shares this lot which we have no right to call a degradation, with innumerable other main instincts, strivings, desires. It is the peculiarity of civilisation that it subdues to itself human emotions, and applies them as motive powers for the purpose of creating results which are not always, which are not even frequently, the natural purpose of these emotions. The whole existence of society, every organisation, every civilisation, rests on the application of this method; in fact, every attitude and action of man is affected by an emotion at its base. Without emotion, man is a sluggish mass, with which nothing can be done.

In order to get anything from him, he must first have his mind excited, and after that we must be able to direct this excitement. All usages and regulations are merely a collection of channels dug in order to act as conduits to the emotions, and to utilise their force in regular employment. By the help of the emotions of love, society has been enabled to create marriage, which does not serve for the satisfaction of the instinct, but should guarantee economic security for the wife and children. With the emotion of sympathy – this preliminary condition of every social structure – with this fount of pity, altruism, and solidarity, man-kind has created the political order, the State, with all its burdensome tyranny, which seems no longer to have anything at all in common with sympathy, which is, nevertheless, its emotional root. With the emotion of mysticism and superstition, society has produced practical morality and all its constraint; with self-love and vanity, patriotism and its caricature, Chauvinism; with the wicked impulses to destruction and murder, the professional qualities of the soldier, still indispensable for the security of the political organism. In short, the whole work of civilisation consists in making itself master of individual emotions, diverting them from their natural goals, applying them to the good of the whole body.

The State society is a machine that is moved only by the emotions of individuals. Social life is simply the product of a very complex and skilfully conducted work of primitive emotions. If, therefore, any one exclaims slightly at the mention of the social productions of art: “That's common, rank utilitarianism!” we are justified in shrugging our shoulders. Utilitarianism? Why, certainly. Utility is the primary law of every society, of every living organism. The lowest living creature of one cell could not support itself for a single instant, unless all its parts were continually working with the object of promoting its existence, of serving the demands of its life – in short, making themselves useful to the whole.

When men came to observe that they possessed among them beings who had stronger emotions than the rest, and made these emotions evident by creations which were calculated to make a deep impression on other men, they, according to the standing rule – I might say, according to the biological rule – of society, made haste to place these exceptional natures, these artists, in the service of the great interests of society.

Whoever can still entertain a doubt that art has always performed a task which was by no means aesthetic, even if fulfilled by aesthetic means, let him cast a glance at the history of the arts.

Let him read the poems of antiquity, gaze on the sculptures and paintings of the Egyptians or Assyrians or Greeks. Let him listen to the far-off and doubtless sadly distorted echo of ancient music in the Hymn to Apollo, restored by over-daring scholarship. Where will he find a work – a single work – which corresponds with the psychological scheme of the origin of artistic creation and with the definitions of the party of “Art for art's sake”?

Where is the work that has been achieved purely for self-satisfaction, for the relief of the artist's nerves? Where is the work that is only to serve beauty? I cannot see it; but what I do see is that all known works serve some purpose of society.

They glorify the gods, the kings, the commonwealth. They extol the dignity of belief, of government, of the mother-country. Homer shows the heroes of the Hellenic race in the bloody apotheosis of their exploits, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides unfold on the stage the myths and sagas of their ancestors. On the Acropolis, in the Parthenon, gleam the gods of the mother-country, the guardians of the commonwealth, shaped by the magic chisel of Phidias. The Stoa, the Poikile, the Stadium, are peopled with the monuments of athletes, warriors, archons, legislators, of all great men who are the people's pride, and are to serve them as models.

Tyrtæus chants his sublime marches to excite the warriors to fight for their country. The singer of the Hymn to Apollo composes his cantatas to make the temple service more impressive. I am well aware that, besides these monuments, there are the little lyric poems of the Anthology, the charming little Tanagra figures, that is to say, very individual revelations, which sing the joys and sorrows of a single soul, which seize the graceful movements and gait of young women who had enraptured a single kneader of the clay. But these pretty little things, although *chef d'œuvres* of their kind, are not, however, to be compared with the

triumphant creations prompted by religious belief and patriotism, whose superhuman splendour fills the centuries.

If we go from pagan antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages and the free-thinking or the openly atheistic Renaissance, the *role* of art remains unchanged. For whom does the artist work? Only for the Church and the palace. The pope, the bishop, the abbot demand of him the decoration of the cathedral and monastery. The priest under the vaulted arch, the monk in his refectory – these must have before their eyes images to remind them of the doctrines of which they are preachers and servants. The people, when they enter God's house, must be caught hold of by the representations of suffering and martyrdoms, of beneficent and comforting miracles, of the horrors of hell and the bliss of paradise, and be strengthened in their faith, seeing with their eyes and touching with their hands what religion teaches. The king's castle, the palace of the great vassals, plume themselves on the works of arts that are consecrated to the glory of their ancestors, of their rank, or, simply, of the dominant system. Here the stately tombs of kings or knights, here the statues showing the ancestor as hero or demi-god. Here the pictures of battles and sieges, of butcheries and victories. Here the painted memorials of great state ceremonies, triumphal entries, receptions of ambassadors, conclusions of advantageous treaties, famous meetings of mighty lords. The object of all this art is always to flatter the vanity of the great, to impose on the populace a high notion of their wealth and power, to make it feel, by all possible means of expression, the superiority of its leaders. We must go down to the Italian Renaissance in order to discover, by the side of religious, dynastic, aristocratic, and political art – for historical art was always designed to serve a political idea or arrangement – in order to discover, I say, by the side of this prescriptive art, the beginning of a purely aesthetic art. When Mantegna paints the “Muses on Olympus,” or Leonardo the “Mona Lisa,” they are no longer desirous of kindling faith or strengthening subjects in obedience, but they want to enrich and brighten existence. But whose existence? That of a wealthy and distinguished patron, of him who has placed the order with them. It is not before the Renaissance that we see the artist gradually emancipate himself from the rule that sternly dictates to him the choice of his theme, and even, up to a certain point, the method of his treatment. He then acquired to some degree the freedom to follow his own power of imagination, and could hope to get a return for his creations, even if he did not serve a dogma or a policy, even if he did not glorify a saint, a king, or a nobleman; if he simply tried to move a man's soul by revealing the secret movements of a human soul.

We see then that, through long centuries, art had the sole task to serve the great institutions of society: religion, monarchy, or one's native country under another form of government, the dominant castes.

The mechanism by which art was held in bondage was the simplest and most naive: the artist had no other customer for his works except the powers that be. These bound him by his necessity to eat daily, or nearly so. The Church, the king, the republic, the city, the ruler, gave the artist commissions, and paid him. If he found no patron in the castle or palace, he had no gold or honour to hope for from any other quarter. Now neither the Church, nor the Government, nor the privileged classes were in the habit of throwing their money out of the window. The money they expended had to bring them profit. They wanted the artist in their pay to become a champion for their cause, in exactly the same way as the cross-bowmen of their body-guard, their judge, their herald, steward, aye, their jailer and executioner. Art, in those days, preached the fear of God and his servants, submission to the king and the State, respect for nobles and officials. The ruling powers made the artist suggest to the people all that was favourable to them. Art was the school of the good subject, the artist the main prop of priestly and monarchical-aristocratic society. The common herd, the million, found none of their human emotions satisfied in art; the voices that rang out of these works only cried to them: "Pray, obey, tremble."

The Netherlands, a free people, were the first to know an art other than the traditional one. In Flanders and Holland, writers, and especially painters, began to speak no longer exclusively of God and the saints, the king and the great, but of the humble, obscure, and nameless multitude. *Genre* painting revived for the first time since ancient days. It told the everyday life of the middle and lower classes, their somewhat gross joys, their somewhat common place sorrows; it showed the ale-house and the mill, the sitting-room and the retail shop. This was not edifying, it is true. The philosophy of this art is low; it hardly widens the spiritual horizon, and is of poor comfort amid the narrowness and bitterness of real life. And yet this art was a forerunner. It denoted a turning-point, the beginning of great and important things. One great king, Lewis XIV., was not deceived about it. With the sharpened keen feeling of the mighty for everything that can encroach on their superhuman dignity, he perceived at once that this new art offended against his kingly majesty. How? There are painters who dare to treat of plebeian subjects! What should that mean? Does art perhaps even fancy that it can be other than a continual homage to the greatness and omnipotence of

kings? And, with an annihilating wave of his hand, he banished from his august presence these daring little pictures, these democratic works of Teniers, Ostade, Dirk Hals, and Gerard Dow, whilst uttering the historic words; “*Enlevez-moi ces grotesques.*”

But time stands not still; development is achieved. Modern democracy appears, and transposes all the conditions of existence of society and its members. Art cannot escape the general revolution. It experiences its influence spiritually and economically; changes its judgment hall and its mart. We do not realise the tremendous meaning of this change. The court that decided as to the worth of the artist and his work was formerly the small circle of possible patrons – princes of the Church, the great, the courtiers. Today this court is criticism, professional criticism. In earlier times it was enough for the artist to please a few people, perhaps only one individual, if the latter happened to be a magnate. He had not to trouble himself about the crowd; moreover, the crowd followed docilely the lead from above. When Dante said:

“Credete Cimabue nella pittura  
Tener lo campo, ed ora ha Giotto il grido,  
Si che la fama di colui oscura;”

What did *grido* mean? What was *fama*? It was the opinion of a court, that of Rome or Pisa, perhaps of Ravenna. We must go to Aretino to discover a specimen of an art critic who was neither a Maecenas like Leo X. or Lorenzo the Magnificent, or even a painter like Vasari, but merely an audacious spirit who arrogated to himself the right of dealing out praise and blame, and conferring glory in the name of something absolutely novel, in the name of public opinion.

From that time it is professional criticism which suggests to the multitude, and imposes on the mighty, its judgment on the artist. But the criticism is disinterested, or at least can be so. It does not expect of the work of art a direct personal advantage, its own glorification, the vindication of its spiritual and material influence. Its measure, therefore, grows larger and broader. It brings to its office philosophical and aesthetic considerations, which the popes and kings could not know when they gave commissions to the artists, their *protégés*. In order to secure success, the artist must now please the critic – many critics – and the latter pass a verdict on him with perceptions, with taste and spiritual prepossessions that very seldom are those of the bishops and great men.

And as the artist has got another tribunal, he also comes before the public under other material and spiritual conditions, and seeks in other ways a market for his work.

In feudal times, as we have seen, the church and palace were the places for works of art. They were seen there under circumstances little favourable for a purely aesthetic appreciation. In the cathedral people were intimidated by the significance of the vast space, the acts of faith, and the perfume of incense; in the castle, by the magnificent garments of the officials, and the weapons of the guard. It was in 1673 that a “Salon,” i.e., a regular art-exhibition, was opened in Paris; and besides the “Salon” public museums were opened everywhere, to which everyone had access without invitation or introduction. The artist was now quite independent; he could work without waiting for orders. He no more needed, in order to become known, to crave humbly a visit to his possibly poverty-stricken studio. Here was a definite place where he could exhibit his work to thousands of spectators – connoisseurs, judges, possible buyers. From that time he worked with an eye to the great public which was sure not to be lacking at his regular rendezvous. If the professional critic became his judge, the mass of people became his Maecenas. Universal suffrage has dethroned Church and royalty, and remains the artist's only patron.

I say expressly – the only. It still happens that the State, *i.e.*, a high official, perhaps a monarch, orders works, assigns to the artist the task of adorning churches and palaces, perhaps even public places and walks, or even creating a monument of political import. But who receives these commissions? The artist pointed out by public opinion, *i.e.* the democratic crowd acting under the suggestion of the critics, who also belong to the crowd. The artist who has gained the advantage of an officially favoured position otherwise than by popular acclamation, who owes it to the whim of a ruler, the mere favouritism of a bishop or some other great personage, is nowadays not esteemed, but despised. He may receive some alms in the shape of money; he may collect ridiculous titles and wretched tags of coloured ribbons, but he will be branded with the name of court-artist, and this name excludes him irredeemably from fame.

The literary man in earlier times lived by the favour of a protector, whom alone he had to trouble about pleasing. Nowadays he lives, through newspapers and books, by the public at large. The dramatic poet had, for his productions, only the subsidised theatre, the theatre royal, which imposed on him its regulations. To-day this theatre is insignificant as compared with the free and independent stage, and the poet need know no other care and

consideration than that of getting a good grip on his public. Then the artist had nothing to hope for, unless he served religion, the monarchy, or the aristocracy. Now subjects from these spheres have actually become laughing-stocks – *pompier*s as they are termed with an expression of contempt; and the artist, if he would become rich and famous, must fish for his subjects in other streams of thought. This is so true that there are rulers who, from feeling that art is making itself independent of them, and will no longer serve as the herald of their thoughts, try even to produce works of art, and would impress their works on the admiration of the multitude, which, nevertheless, does not admire.

The great revolution is consequently accomplished; art now works only for the masses. It is still always the State that commissions; it is still always the few rich who buy; but it is really universal suffrage that imposes on them its own inclinations. But we do not believe that that new Maecenas, the people at large, has other habits of mind or ways of acting than had the Maecenas of the past. The people too, exactly like the priests and kings of old, demands that art should please and flatter it.

But it further demands something else, something more than pleasure and obsequiousness – viz., a high satisfaction, a corrective of an evil of which it is perhaps not clearly conscious, but which, nevertheless, it feels strongly. And I will now try to point out this evil.

One of the most striking phenomena of modern life is specialisation applied to all departments. Every one tills merely a very little bit of field or rather he ploughs only one and the same furrow. This is true of mental craftsmen. It is still more true of handicraftsmen. What existence does such a man lead nowadays? There is no longer one who fabricates an entire chair. One always makes the arms, other the legs, a third the back, a fourth the cane-work. A knife goes through a dozen hands, a needle, I believe, through thirty. In order to attain that extreme skill which competition demands of him and which he must supply, if he would earn his bread, the workman continually repeats the movement, becomes a machine, less than a machine, a tiny part of a machine, a single wheel, a single screw. His being shrivels up, his soul suffers.

All development is denied him; all his faculties, except the one he is always employing, become crippled, and disappear. The man gradually sinks almost to the low level of a polypus, which is only an organ of a hydromedusa.

Whence comes the strange fascination that the foremost men of the Italian Renaissance exercise on us? The reason is that they were complete men. All their faculties were fully developed – all that offered a possibility in them was developed to the utmost. Nothing human was alien to them.

With marvellous freedom they circumscribed the whole circle of human knowledge and faculties. Then the learned man was an universal scholar; his knowledge was encyclopaedic. The poets were at the same time men of action. Men of rank were artists and writers, and the artists were all they wished to be. Michael Angelo painted, modelled, built the cupola of St Peter's, and wrote charming verses. Benvenuto Cellini handled the spatula as well as the mallet, the crayon as well as the pen, and the sword as well as all these tools.

Macchiavelli governed as wonderfully as he wrote, and Leonardo painted the “Last Supper” between a musical composition, a treatise on mechanics, a plan of a fortification, the model of a triumphal car, and the plan of a canal for the purpose of irrigation.

Count Castiglione's “Cortegiano” shows us the ideal of the man at the time of the Renaissance. He was probably the fairest flower ever produced by the human plant. The modern man may envy him; he can never be his peer, but must shrivel up in his narrow corner. Hypertrophy of a single, often subordinate faculty, atrophy of all the rest – such is the lot to which he is ruthlessly condemned.

And there is no change possible in respect of it; no herb grown can prove an antidote to that bane. Division of labour gives to the whole advantages too great to be dispensed with out of consideration for the individual. Division of labour is the true condition of all progress, though in this case, as in so many others, progress exacts a heavy, very heavy, price for its services.

Everyone is painfully aware of this reverse side of progress; many consciously take themselves to task for it. Why has the madhouse philosophy which extols the superman been able to subjugate spirited youth? Because it meets the longing for a fuller life of the personality. And anarchism?

What is the secret that makes it attractive to true consciences and loving hearts? Nothing except that anarchy seems to promise unchecked development of the individuality. In all these nonsensical, wild, and criminal movements there is some little revolt against the



pinching and tightening in of the personality entailed by the modern conditions of labour, and this is the ingredient that recruits adherents among those unaccustomed to rigorous examination of their thoughts. And when the workmen demand an eight-hours' day, what do they want? To find time to go and drink at the public house, to be able to idle, as the ill-wishers who calumniate them assert? No; they want to have a few hours in which to cease to be mechanical tools, in which they may again be men, and participate in the great life of the community.

But by what means can we give back to men what division of labour and specialisation – these irrefragable consequences of contemporary progress – have taken from them? By what means can we remake beings developed from them harmonic?

Perhaps in a very distant future science will affect this necessary, demanded, and longed for miracle.

Perhaps mankind will once more see these workers who earn their bread during a part of the day by handicraft, and during the rest of the time linger on the highest summits of human thought and knowledge; a Socrates, who is a stonemason; a Spinoza, who polishes spectacle glasses. But, as I have said before, that will be feasible only in a very remote future, for science is not easily accessible; the way leading to it is long and rough, and the full life through science is possible only to men of a higher spiritual development than the average people nowadays.

But if science is no longer the usual companion of the man of the masses, and, unfortunately, will not be so for a long time, art, on the other hand, admits him to familiar intercourse. No tedious initiation is requisite for it, nor any hard labours which the majority cannot perform. It is sufficient to have eyes and ears, and a human heart in one's breast.

After an apprenticeship, which may be very short; after some habituation which one easily acquires by intercourse with beautiful works, almost every one arrives so far that, even if he cannot appreciate the technical and philosophical merits of a work of art with consciousness, yet he can feel its charm and be susceptible of emotions from it.

Art it is, then, which can give to modern humanity what it most needs – the means of attaining the full life. Here lies, unless I am deceived, the greatness, the lofty mission of art in

a democratic society which rests on a civilisation, the marks of which, the real condition of which, are severe specialisation and division of labour carried to an extreme.

Art raises man out of industrialism and introduces him to a higher world. In this artist-created world the man who is bundled together stretches himself straight; the shrivelled broadens out ; the fraction of a man becomes complete. Here he who belongs to his machine or observation-instrument becomes once more a free man and citizen of the world – a man participating in the life of the community, and enjoying with the rest all the beauties of heaven and earth, all the greatness of heart and soul of the pick of men. Through art a person imprisoned in his daily avocation comes into communion with all civilisations. Here is the paradise to which the astronomer descends from his constellations, to which the miner ascends from his pit, in order to participate in the same joys and raptures, to bring to flower whatever potentialities they possess. The mission of art in society present and future is, in short, to liberate the prisoner of subdivided labour, to restore the dignity of manhood to the being degraded into a little wheel of a machine.

But art, which is to fulfil this new and lofty mission, cannot, manifestly, be conventional art.

On this theocracy, monarchy, and aristocracy have stamped the character that suited them. The multitude at the present day find no sort of joy in works which depict to them the bliss of paradise and the torments of hell, which extol some paste-board king with crown and sceptre, which offer for their admiration the greatness of blue-blooded privileged beings. Like the patrons of earlier times, the people, who now represent Maecenas of old, are interested in art only for themselves. The sources of their emotions in art are the emotions of their own lives. In the work of art that is to attract them, they must find themselves again, but, as formerly the priest and king did, magnified and ennobled. The work of art must show him his own likeness, but a beautiful one; it must raise the people in their own eyes, and teach them to respect themselves.

This the common realism has not comprehended, which broke in on art with a din, and dared to call upon the democracy. The genuine people have never had a mind to realism of this sort, but have always dismissed it roughly. The rough proof of a hateful and tedious reality, such as the pictures of Courbet or Bastien Lepage, has never attracted any but the superfine, and this only, by the well-known psychological law of contrast, whereby an

impression that is the exact opposite of the usual impression can impart a pleasurable feeling for a short time. The rich and luxurious like to see works of ugliness and misery; the poor and afflicted do not like them. It is the same in regard to literature. Reluctant protests have frequently become loud, in these socialistic days, against the realism which a party organ offers its readers. The working class do not wish to know anything about this realism which professes to be modern and democratic, yet is, in reality, only wretched and repulsive. It coops them up in the narrowness of their everyday existence, but their wish is to get out of it.

Pictures such as Millet's, sculptures such as Constantin Meunier's – works which seek to show the dignity and beauty of the occupations of the masses, which constitute a hallowing of work, an apotheosis of the tragedies and idylls, of all the sweet and bitter emotions of the people's life – these works, to my thinking, exhibit the type of future art.

Some great genius will, perhaps, find another formula. What one may, however, say for certain is this, that the art of the future will not be realistic in the narrow sense of the word. But it will not be mystical and aesthetic either. The people will never interest themselves in half-tone angels of boundless length, in violet -hued Virgins with lilies in their hands in a conventional bush, in enigmatical, mysterious verses. And esoteric art will never give the people what they need, viz., the liberating ideal. The art of the cultivator of the Ego, the dilettantti of the snobs of a Talmi - aristocracy, presumes to demand the future for it. Is that to be an art of the future, an art of progress? One can only laugh at the notion.

The art of the future will be no “little chapel,” but a mighty cathedral, wide enough to admit the whole of mankind. And that will be exactly its vocation: to be the hallowed place wherein mankind will rise again to the child ship of God for which religion has educated them in past stages of evolution.

## Call for papers

CFP: “Histories of art history”

*Art History Supplement*, Issue 3.1, January 2013

[Submission deadline December 15, 2012](#)

*Art History Supplement (AHS)* (Online edition: ISSN 2046-9225) publishes bimonthly material, dealing with all time periods, methodologies, techniques and debates within the board field of Art History. Further, the general themes intended to be covered in each volume could be history of art history, history of conservation, history of museology, history of painting, history of sculpture and history of architecture. Contributions from any other science (social or not) corresponding to material culture are also welcome.

The themes to be discussed under *Histories of art history* may include, but are not limited to:

- \_Teaching western art history to non-western students,
- \_Teaching non-western art history to western students,
- \_ Western art historians, and collectors, with non-western interests before the museum and academic discovery of non-western arts and art history,
- \_Non-western published art history books – canons VS western published survey art history books acting as canons,
- \_Art, art history and art historians in war times,
- \_Patrimony in danger and its “protectors”, or
- \_Histories of museums and monuments under resistance / captivity / commandeering
- \_Art in times of peace.

**A submission** consists of:

1. A **manuscript** of minimum 3000 words (in English, French or in Italian)
2. A 100-150 word **abstract** (in English)
3. A list of **illustrations** (captions), if any. Each illustration should be sent as separate file; jp(e)g or .tiff

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